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SUBJECT: LESSONS LEARNED FROM IDP RETURNS TO  
BAGHDAD'S SAYDIYA NEIGHBORHOOD

REFERENCE: Statistical Source for Returnee Data  
for the period: summer of 2008 - January 2010, was  
the Saydiya Support Council.

1. (SBU) Summary: Community leaders from south Baghdad's Saydiya neighborhood report that approximately 7,200 displaced families have returned since early 2008 and that around 1,400 families have not returned but rent out their homes. (NOTE: Baghdad ePRT tracking data from police statistics showed 2266 families returned to Saydiyah during the period 14 March 2007 - 18 February 2009 END NOTE.) Returns to Saydiya illustrate important points about IDP returns in Iraq: 1) the necessity of engaging the support of local community leaders, as opposed to working through government institutions exclusively in facilitating returns, 2) the stabilizing impact of the use of concrete walls in potential areas of return, and 3) the willingness of some returnees to accept higher security risks and poorer basic services than the international community might assume. Some elements of the Saydiya experience cannot be repeated such as the robust presence of U.S. troops in the area of return and the expenditure of Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds to help fill assistance gaps. Elements like the ability of local leaders to encourage and sustain returns despite precarious security and difficult living conditions offer hope for returns after the U.S. drawdown. End Summary.

Background  
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2. (U) Saydiya, a south-Baghdad neighborhood in the Rashid District has many upscale houses and is home to people of some affluence; in south Baghdad's Rashid district, it was a mixed Sunni and Shia area, located along what became a sectarian fault line in late 2006. Just south of Bayaa, a Shia area then dominated by the Jaysh Al-Mahdi Militia, and just east of Risala, a predominantly Sunni area then dominated by Al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremist groups, Saydiya was the scene of a turf war between Sunni and Shia militants and daily anti-U.S. attacks. It was one of the most dangerous areas of Baghdad. Most residents were educated professionals including former regime military officers, university professors, and doctors, a demographic that could afford to flee and would not form militias for self-defense. More than 8,000 families, over half of the area's residential population, fled between

late 2006 and mid 2007. Several hundred Shia families as well as families with members working with the U.S. Government fled in 2005 as Al-Qaeda and other Sunni militants consolidated influence in the area.

¶3. (SBU) In late 2007, United States and Iraqi forces cleared Saydiya house by house. In early 2008, concrete walls were erected around the neighborhood controlling access through two checkpoints. The walled area included about 12,500 houses that accommodated an original population of about 60,000. In late 2007, the Prime Minister's Implementation and Follow-Up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR) appointed a Support Council, a group of 26 Sunni and Shia community leaders, to fill the role of the elected but inactive Neighborhood Council. The members of the Neighborhood Council had been displaced, killed or jailed. In early 2008, IFCNR and the Support Council began reaching out to Saydiya's displaced through the media to try to facilitate returns. After potential returnees proved ownership of homes, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) with U.S. support, evicted squatters and cleared weapons caches and booby traps, ISF also cleared weapons caches and booby traps, ISF also facilitated movement through checkpoints, which had been established in the area. U.S. troops conducted foot patrols day and night. In the spring of 2008, displaced families were returning at a rate of about 20 families per day. As of

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July 2008, about 1,800 families had returned. The Support Council told Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) representatives that about 7,200 families had returned as of January 2010.

Lessons Learned: Unelected Bodies Drove Returns Process, Not GoI Ministries:

¶4. (SBU) IFCNR and its Support Council facilitated the returns process in Saydiya with robust support from U.S. forces and ISF. Support Council members fielded inquiries from potential returnees, verified returnee property ownership with the Land Deed Registry, checked the conditions of potential returnee homes to determine if they were habitable, and arbitrated disputes among residents. MoDM stipends required lengthy bureaucratic procedures and many returnees were not registered as IDPs leaving them ineligible for MoDM stipends. Because of this, IFCNR used funds from the Prime Minister's Office to give small stipends for the first groups to return. IFCNR also provided stipends to Support Council members since their efforts required a full-time commitment and they incurred incidental expenses.

¶5. (U) U.S. forces used CERP funds to rent a villa for the Support Council, distribute micro-grants to small business owners, and rehabilitate local infrastructure. For a time, Saydiya's Neighborhood Council met in the Support Council's structure. In contrast, the MoDM, Baghdad Provincial Government, the Rashid District Council, and service ministries did little to facilitate returns to Saydiya. Support Council members report that fewer than half of Saydiya's returnees are registered with MoDM and have received their one million dinar stipend and that

the Baghdad Governorate has provided property compensation to 107 homeowners in a neighborhood that experienced considerable property damage. Residents report that line ministries did not do much to improve services. At the height of returns to Saydiya in the summer of 2008, pools of sewage flooded main roads, access to running water was sporadic, and residents received two hours of electricity per day from the state grid.

Sunni/Shia polarity in the Support Council remained vivid through early 2009. Mixed returns continued despite the change of Support Council leadership from Sunni to Shia, with a majority of one, in a telephonic vote conducted in early 2008. Although there were allegations that the Shia Chairman of the Support Council, Abu Marwan, was manipulating returns, police statistics provided to the former ePRT for the Rashids showed 227 Sunni families returning vice 399 Shia families during mid-March 2007 through mid-February 2009.

Lessons Learned: T-Walls Prove Essential in Providing Security:

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¶6. (SBU) Saydiya residents and Support Council members told OFDA that concrete walls proved decisive in facilitating returns. They allowed security forces to prevent most militia and weapons from re-entering the area after it had been cleared. Some residents reported that they would consider leaving Saydiya if the walls were removed because they would anticipate an immediate deterioration in security conditions. Residents also said the visible presence of large amounts of U.S. and Iraqi forces created confidence and deterred violence. There has been a trade-off however, as T-walls have created security but held back economic recovery in some of the neighborhoods closest to them. Redevelopment of the Saydiya Fish Market was in an advanced stage when it was halted by the placement of T-walls in March 2009.

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Sustainable Returns Occurred Despite Precarious Security:

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¶7. (SBU) Support Council members told OFDA that despite steady but low levels of attacks in the area, few returnees fled. Support Council members said a number of families received threatening letters with bullets in them and that perhaps ten returnees were killed in 2008. However, they said most attacks targeted U.S. and Iraqi security forces and Support Council members. In 2008 two Support Council members, including the resettlement committee chairman, were killed by car bombs, three were wounded in shooting attacks (the brother of one of the chairmen was fatally wounded), and one was targeted by a bomb planted outside his house. Police and one of the victims suspected Shia-Sunni tension within the Support Council as a motive behind one of the 2008 shooting attacks. Children of several Support Council members were killed or wounded in attacks in 2009.

¶8. (SBU) In addition to the estimated 1,400 families renting out their homes in Saydiya, Support Council members say others remain

displaced, their homes are vacant. One family squatting in a cinderblock room in the International Zone displaced from their four-bedroom villa in Saydiya, told OFDA Reps: "We feel safe enough to visit, but we aren't ready to move back. People know we used to work at the Embassy and they've threatened to kill us before. How can we be sure they aren't still out there?"

Lessons Learned: This is Not Darfur

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¶9. (SBU) When OFDA asked Support Council members what more could have been done to support returns, they reported that not all assistance reflected an understanding of the neighborhood's needs. The Support Council Chairman emphasized that educated, urban residents have different needs than most donors anticipated. The chairman's comments reflect a challenge humanitarians have struggled within Iraq, the fact that as a middle-income country, beneficiary expectations are higher than in many humanitarian responses. He complained that some NGOs, in their apparent effort to balance assistance among sects, alienated the populace. "Needy families were told, 'sorry, we've provided assistance to Sunnis and now we need to find some Shia.' This is unacceptable."

There's No Place Like Home, Even with Sewage in the Yard:

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¶10. (SBU) When the first waves of returns to Saydiya began in 2008, several areas were flooded with sewage from burst pipes. The girls' school had no functioning bathrooms, running water in most homes was erratic with low water pressure, and the neighborhood had an hour or two of electricity per day from the state grid (consistent with other Baghdad neighborhoods). In June 2008, OFDA asked returnees what had prompted them to come home despite the lack of services and precarious security. One family that had been staying with relatives in Karada (east Baghdad) replied, "The yard might be covered in sewage right now, but we will fix it. This is our home. We don't want to impose on our daughter anymore."

¶11. (SBU) NOTE: Many of the conditions that facilitated returns to Saydiya cannot be repeated in light of the bilateral Security Agreement, including the robust presence of U.S. combat troops and the rapid expenditure of CERP funds. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) do not have the budget or logistical capacity to erect large quantities of concrete walls and Iraqi officials might find it politically unfeasible to wall off new areas

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while claiming credit for having improved security. ISF have proven generally reluctant to conduct the kind of visible foot patrols that created confidence and deterred violence among tense residents in Saydiya, favoring instead static checkpoints that can fail to improve security off the main roads. However, ISF may prove less reluctant than U.S. troops to detain those suspected of carrying out attacks or inciting violence against returnees. With decreasing U.S. scrutiny and political leverage, it might be easier for Iraqi leaders to use returns to demographically engineer neighborhoods

for political or strategic gains, which could  
undermine stability and hinder returns. End NOTE.

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